

# ACSJC SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE: *Centesimus Annus (On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum)*

The year 1989 was a monumental one of civil protests against communism throughout Eastern and Central Europe. Communism as a major political and economic force collapsed under opposition to one-party rule. The mood of that year is perhaps best remembered in the 'Solidarity' movement's forcing elections in Poland and images of citizens demolishing the Berlin wall that had divided East and West.

In 1991, Pope John Paul II reflected on the rapid downfall of communism in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. He named three 'decisive factors' in the fall of these regimes:

- the violation of the rights of workers
- the inefficiency of the economic system, which prevented initiative, private ownership and economic freedom
- the spiritual void of atheism, which had denied purpose and meaning in life for younger generations (# 13, 22–24).

But John Paul II remained concerned for the people of these nations as they turned to the market economy and endured economic hardship in the process. He was also concerned for the peoples of the 'Third World' who were still impoverished and denied the social development and economic prosperity of the market (# 26–29).

## The common destination of goods

Should capitalism be their only option? The Pope answered the question this way:

*If by 'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognises the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative ... But if by 'capitalism' is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative (# 42).*

He said it appeared that the 'the free market is the most efficient instrument for utilising resources and effectively responding to needs' (# 34).

Some politicians and economists quote this sentence as being an unqualified endorsement of free-market ideology. However, the Pope immediately spells out some important qualifications:

- Products must be able to fetch a fair and reasonable price that respects the dignity of the buyer and seller.
- There are many human needs that have no place on the market.
- Fundamental human needs should not remain unsatisfied – the market cannot allow people to perish.
- Assistance must be provided to ensure vulnerable people can 'enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources'.
- Even prior to the law of supply and demand, there is something owed to the human person because of his or her human dignity – 'the possibility to survive and, at the same time, to make an active contribution to the common good of humanity' (# 34).

These qualifications are not expressions of an 'anti-market' sentiment. They are the rightful demands that should be advanced by the State for the proper management of the market (# 35).

The possession of material goods is not an absolute rights and the legitimacy of private ownership has limits that recognise the common destination of goods as God intended (# 30).



## Authentic human development

Pope John Paul II was particularly concerned about the phenomenon of consumerism in advanced capitalist nations. He said that 'a given culture reveals its overall understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption'. A culture that appeals to opulent life-styles, artificial need and instant gratification is offering much less than authentic human development.

*It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being', and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. (# 36)*

He said that the force of consumerism was damaging to individuals and society as a whole. Ironically, this aspect of the free market has similarities to the Marxist ideology it opposed – it totally reduces people 'to the sphere of economics and the sphere of material needs' (#19).

The Pope called for a great deal of educational and cultural work to counter consumerism and ensure authentic human development:

*It is therefore necessary to create life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments. In this regard, it is not a matter of the duty of charity alone, that is, the duty to give from one's 'abundance', and sometimes even out of one's needs, in order to provide what is essential for the life of a poor person. (# 36)*

## Solidarity

What would this solidarity look like? What can we do? Pope John Paul identified the first step when he said:

*[[I]t will be necessary to abandon a mentality in which the poor – as individuals and as peoples – are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced. The poor ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all. (# 28)*

Drawing on the encyclicals of his predecessors, the Pope highlights again the programs and policies that the State must implement as a practical expression of solidarity and charity. Some of these include:

- adequate family wage levels ensuring saving
- adequate conditions, protections and investment in the labour force
- the support of union membership and workers' organisations
- job creation and a solid system of social security and, on occasion, industry protection
- support for particularly vulnerable groups, including refugees, immigrants, the elderly, the sick, substance abusers etc.

(# 15,19,34,35,48)

He stresses that a concrete commitment to solidarity and charity provides a kind of antidote to the individualism and selfishness in society:

*The advancement of the poor constitutes a great opportunity for the moral, cultural and even economic growth of all humanity (# 28).*

## For reflection and discussion

Can you think of circumstances where we need to apply limitations to the free market to ensure that resources are used efficiently and there is an effective response to human need?

What are some ways in which we can resist consumerism and ensure authentic human development?

Where in Australia today do we see people in need being represented as 'irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced'? How can we challenge this and turn it around for everyone's benefit?

## Documents

The encyclical *Centesimus Annus* can be found at:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html)